

NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-1435
CHRIS KERN

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ELECTION '76: A NONVOTING MAJORITY?

ANNCR:

AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS HAVE TRADITIONALLY BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY LOW VOTER TURNOUT, AND THE PREDICTION OF THE EXPERTS IS THAT THIS YEAR WILL BE NO EXCEPTION. CHRIS KERN HAS SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE NONVOTER.

VOICE:

BOTH MAJOR AMERICAN PARTIES ARE MAKING SPECIAL EFFORTS THIS YEAR TO ENCOURAGE THEIR SUPPORTERS TO VOTE, BUT A RECENT PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY INDICATES THAT THEY WILL PROBABLY BE DISAPPOINTED. THE SURVEY SUGGESTS THAT UNLESS SOMETHING DRAMATIC HAPPENS BETWEEN NOW AND THE NOVEMBER ELECTION DAY, A MAJORITY OF THE ELIGIBLE VOTERS -- SOME SEVENTY MILLION POLITICAL NONPARTICIPANTS -- WILL DECIDE NOT TO CAST THEIR BALLOTS.

THE SURVEY ALSO SHOWS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN SOME IMPORTANT CHANGES IN THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AMERICANS WHO STAY AWAY FROM THE POLLS. IT HAS USUALLY BEEN ASSUMED THAT THE TYPICAL NONVOTER WAS POOR, UNEDUCATED OR -- FOR A NUMBER OF TECHNICAL REASONS, SUCH AS A RECENT CHANGE OF RESIDENCE -- SIMPLY INELIGIBLE. BUT THE SURVEY, WHICH WAS CONDUCTED IN LATE JULY FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER, INDICATES THAT THE DECISION NOT TO VOTE OFTEN REPRESENTS A QUITE DELIBERATE CHOICE.

A MAJORITY OF THOSE QUESTIONED SAID THEY DON'T PLAN TO VOTE BECAUSE THEY DON'T BELIEVE THAT THE CANDIDATES ARE SAYING OR BECAUSE THEY DON'T THINK IT WILL MATTER WHO IS ELECTED. THEY ARE SIMPLY ANTI-POLITICIAN, AND THEY ARE IN EFFECT USING THE ELECTION PROCESS TO SEND THEIR MESSAGE BACK TO WASHINGTON BY NOT GOING TO THE POLLS.

THERE IS ALSO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THESE NONVOTERS WON'T CONFINE THEIR POLITICAL INACTIVITY TO THIS ELECTION. MORE THAN HALF OF THEM SAID THEY DON'T INTEND TO VOTE AGAIN. SINCE MOST OF THE NONVOTERS ARE IN THE 18-TO-34 YEAR AGE GROUP, THE STUDY'S AUTHORS THINK THE UNITED STATES MAY BE BRINGING UP A "LOST GENERATION" IN POLITICS.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME A MAJOR PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY HAS BEEN DEVOTED SPECIFICALLY TO NONVOTERS, AND THE RESULTS HAVE TAKEN ALMOST EVERYBODY BY SURPRISE. THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT AMERICANS WHO DON'T VOTE HAVE BEEN KEPT AWAY FROM THE POLLS BY ONE REASON OR ANOTHER. ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE VOTER TURNOUT HAVE RELIED ON SIMPLIFIED PROCEDURES -- SUCH AS VOTER REGISTRATION BY POSTCARD INSTEAD OF IN PERSON -- AND DEVICES TO MAKE VOTING MORE CONVENIENT -- SUCH AS FREE TRANSPORTATION TO THE POLLS.

BUT NOW IT APPEARS THAT A LARGE NUMBER OF NONVOTERS SIMPLY CAN'T BE REACHED BY THESE TRADITIONAL APPROACHES. THEY ARE NOT BEING KEPT AWAY FROM THE POLLS; THEY ARE STAYING AWAY DELIBERATELY. AND THE ONUS IS ON THE CANDIDATES TO MAKE THEM WANT TO CHANGE THEIR MINDS.

GH/PBT